

# An abstract of the thesis “In Quest of Identity: J. D. Salinger’s Holden Caulfield and Seymour Glass”

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## Introduction

There is the description in which Holden talks with a psychiatrist at the ending of *The Catcher in the Rye*. Some of the readers might interpret that Holden failed in his quest for identity because of this description. However, the scene of the reconciliation between Holden and the vulgar-ians or the scene where Holden gives up seeking for “the catcher in the rye” gives us the positive impression that he succeeded in his quest for identity. *The Catcher* admits of two interpretations. The latter one seems reasonable to me. I shall try to prove it by referring to Jungian psychology.

## CHAPTER I: Out of “The Small Kingdom”

Most critics would accept that many of Salinger’s works deal with an adolescent’s quest for identity. A child can be prince of “the small kingdom,” which I am using as the key word referring to the undeveloped conscious mind (as opposed to the unconscious of Freudian theory) of a child, and feel safe and comfortable under the protection of his parents, king and queen, until life calls him forth to independence. He, however, cannot stay in “the small kingdom” forever. There is the larger outside world in front of him. An adolescent’s quest for identity begins when he leaves for the larger outside world.

## CHAPTER II: "The Assertive Vulgarian" vs. "The Responsive Outsider"

There has been fairly general agreement that the main theme of *The Catcher* is innocence vs. vulgarity. According to this agreement, what he seeks for is innocence and what he stands against is vulgarity. However, to be closely examined, there is not clear and reliable evidence to prove Holden's consistent sense of hatred against vulgarity in *The Catcher*. Holden's attitude toward vulgarity is quite vague. Christopher Parker acutely points out that Holden is vulgar himself. This makes us notice one of the complex problems of an adolescent's mind. We can see, as one of the problems, the danger of an undeveloped mind's identifying itself with other people, in Holden's attitude.

Let us now attempt to look at the antagonism between, to borrow Ihab Hassan's words, "the Responsive Outsider" and "the Assertive Vulgarian" not merely as the description of the outside world but as the description of Salinger's hero's inner self. If we assume that "the Responsive Outsider" and "the Assertive Vulgarian" are the psychological projection of Holden, we can say that "the Responsive Outsider" is what "the small kingdom" is projected outside while "the Assertive Vulgarian" is the outward projection of the negative part of his mind, to borrow psychological terms, the shadow. Holden avoids facing his own vulgarity by projecting it on other people.

According to Jungian psychology, while the shadow is not recognized by the conscious mind, the collective unconscious, which is universal in mankind in the depth of the unconscious, and the shadow keep mixed up, and they cannot function creatively with the conscious mind.

## CHAPTER III: The Sad Ending of *Bananafish*

"I'm Crazy," which is one of Salinger's earlier short stories and is included in *The Catcher*, describes that Holden suddenly recalls the ducks in the lagoon in Central Park. I would like to assume the meaning of the

ducks with taking into consideration the relation between the conscious mind and the collective unconscious. The point to observe in *The Catcher* about this question is the scene where Holden is talking with Phoebe in her room. When he is asked to name one thing which he likes very much, he replies that he likes the two nuns, James Castle, and Allie. We can be fairly certain about the reason why he likes the nuns. This is because he wants a motherly figure who understands him and receives him with warm motherly love. We can see that Holden does not seek for only the Mother as a shelter from his recollection of James Castle. He is "the Responsive Outsider" with paternal strength, with which he stuck to his assertion to the bitter end.

Holden's quest for motherly love and paternal strength, which both are opposite of each other, means the conflict between the conscious mind and the unconscious of Holden in his mental growth. The mother-quest is regression to the matrix, and the father-quest is progression to the larger outside world. To progress toward the larger outside world, he ought to overcome with paternal strength the regression to the matrix.

Thinking over the ducks from this psychological viewpoint gives us an interpretation that a frail duck on the surface of the water symbolizes Holden's conscious mind. On the other hand, the water under the duck, the lagoon in Central Park, can be interpreted as the symbol of the matrix, the unconscious. We may say that Holden's anxiety for the ducks in the wintertime suggests his anxiety for his conscious mind bound hand and foot by the unconscious. The same motif can be seen in "Bananafish," which is one of Salinger's famous short stories.

## CHAPTER IV: To Maturity

We shall look into the process of the development of Holden's conscious mind. First, we shall focus on the scene where Holden finds a graffito of "Fuck You" on the wall of the school to which Phoebe goes. Here, Holden feels himself to be helpless. He begins to notice the difference between helpless Holden in the outside world and Holden as prince of "the small kingdom." Secondly, we must draw attention to the scene where Phoebe

tries to follow Holden, who is escaping to the West, and says that she will give up playing a major role in a play at school. Holden tries to make Phoebe stop crying, but he cannot do anything about it after all.

Finally Holden recognizes that he is so helpless that he cannot do anything about Phoebe or the obscene graffiti on the wall. He is never able to become the children's savior, "the catcher in the rye." We can understand this from the scene, where Holden recognizes: "The thing with kids is, if they want to grab for the golden ring, you have to let them do it... If they fall off, they fall off. ...". Here, he notices that the hero of "the catcher in the rye" is only illusional. He can never become a perfect ideal image because he has his limitations as a human being.

Here, "the small kingdom" collapsed totally. He recognizes that he is not perfect and has also the negative side, vulgarity, like other people. We can see this from the closing chapter in *The Catcher*, where Holden misses the vulgarians and feels an affinity for them. The vulgarity of them probably comes from their limitations that they have as human beings. Holden, who strongly believed that he was one of the outsiders, notices here that he is also one of the vulgarians. Now we can understand that "the development of the conscious mind" and "the reconciliation between 'the Assertive Vulgarian' and 'the Responsive Outsider'" are the integration of the shadow into the conscious mind.

The rain soaking him to the skin at the ending part of the story means that "the small kingdom" is collapsing and Holden's complex problems are coming unraveled. It is the destruction for recreation. This destruction enables him to develop his conscious mind. Here, Holden is liberated from his infancy, and starts on a trip to maturity.

## Conclusion

As we have seen, Holden recognized that he was not perfect and had also the negative side, vulgarity, like other people in the latter part of *The Catcher*. This recognition enabled him to accept the shadow as part of himself. Now we can understand that "the development of the conscious mind" and "the reconciliation between 'the Assertive Vulgarian' and 'the

Responsive Outsider'" are the integration of the shadow into the conscious mind.

Thus Holden accomplished his quest for identity. An adolescent's changeable mental state is described in detail in *The Catcher*, as we have seen. Jungian psychology helped me a lot in interpreting these descriptions. Although I do not think that psychological approach is the only effective approach to literary works, I strongly believe that a better understanding of the mind helps a great deal in interpreting literary works.